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ABSTRACT

Peer tutors can facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities into regular education classrooms, especially in schools where money is not available for aides. The first steps in such a program are determining the best placements for students with disabilities and training the peer tutors. Training should cover expectations of peer tutors, typical characteristics of children with disabilities, specific knowledge and skills in working with their charges, handling bullies, and being diplomatic with difficult teachers. Holding peer tutors to a standard of knowledge and skills builds esprit de corps. Rewards for the tutors should be built into the program. These may include school credit, small weekly rewards, and larger rewards such as a day-long field trip at the end of each semester. Peer tutors can be recruited through personal contacts and referrals from school staff and counselors. When selecting peer tutors, remember that the qualities needed--perseverance, higher-order thinking, leadership, and willingness to stand firm against the odds--can be found in students other than those who are getting high academic scores and are in leadership positions in student organizations. Several people such as counselors and trusted students should interview and rate applicants to get a broader insight. The actions of peer tutors and their charges should be monitored, as well as the general school behavior of tutors. An appendix contains application and rating forms. (TD)

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Developing a Peer Tutor Training Program That Fits Your Local Needs

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RC 023414

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DEVELOPING A PEER TUTOR TRAINING PROGRAM THAT FITS YOUR LOCAL NEEDS

"This district hired you to get those kids into the real classrooms. It doesn't really matter where you put them, as long as they don't cause trouble and the teachers don't mind."

"Well, OK, I think I can do that. What kind of support do you have in place?"

"You mean like an aid?"

"Yah, with this many students and getting them integrated into the general classroom I know that I'm going to need some back-up, don't you agree?"

"Well, that would be nice, but the district is over budgeted as it is, there's no money for any aids. You'll just have to make do by yourself."

I had just started in a new district as a teacher in a self-contained unit for children with severe disabilities. One of my responsibilities was to integrate our students in the unit into the general classroom. Now I was being told that I had to do this without any help. At any one time in the day I could have four to five students in other classrooms as well as the students in my classroom. How was I to provide the supervision that was necessary with this population of students?

This type of a scenario occurs everyday in our public schools. Fortunately for me, I had taught in a two room rural school where our structure was much looser than in most schools. Of course all students were integrated! We didn't have a special class for anyone! We also shared some students. For different subjects some of my 3rd and 4th graders went into the 5th-8th grade room and some of the 5th and 6th graders came into my 1st-4th grade room. It was common practice for students to help students. This experience developed in me the attitude that peer tutors were an important part of teaching.

The concept of peers helping peers is as old as written accounts of education, in fact one school set up 200 years ago in India exclusively used older students as teachers (Gordon & Gordon, 1990). It is common knowledge (supported by studies) (Greenwood, Dinwiddie, Terry, Wade, Stanley, Thibadeau, & Delquardri, 1984) that those being helped by their peers can learn as well, and sometimes better, than when taught by an adult teacher. We also know that the peer helper or tutor gains both academically as well as socially by their involvement (Allen, 1976). In talking to other teachers about peer tutors, I never have had to sell the idea of using peers. Usually teachers express concern about how to handle the peer tutors, or how to find them.

Obligations

Teacher Obligations

The starting point is to determine what your obligations will be. Just as you have obligations to the school district and you have obligations to the students under your care, you will have obligations to students who work for you as peer tutors. The first obligation is to have a well thought out program. You need to know why, when, how and where you are going to use peer tutors. This requires that you determine the best placements for the students in your care. Talk to the various general education teachers and get their cooperation for a placement and the expected level of work for your student in their class. Once you know where your students will be, then you can determine what you need in the way of peer tutors.

Another obligation is to train your peer tutors. One of the major factors is the time to do the training. All the schools in which I taught had Channel One. I took a 20 minute Channel One period each week for peer tutor training. We first went over the training program that I had designed for them. Incorporated in the training program were my expectations of the peer tutors, typical characteristics of children with severe disabilities, and expectations

RC 023416

of the job. Once the initial training was complete, and I was convinced that all of my peer tutors had a good grasp of the basics, we concentrated on current challenges they were facing. These included things like specific knowledge and skills in working with their charges, handling bullies in school, and how to be diplomatic with difficult teachers. When recruiting the peer tutors I promised them and their parents that the training program would be equivalent to an introduction to high school Psychology 101 with special emphasis on applied behavior analysis.

It is important that you hold your peer tutors to a standard of knowledge and skills. They should realize that they know things and can do things that other students in the school will not know or be able to do. This builds esprit de corps in your peer tutors and you will find it easier to recruit new peer tutors later.

You are also obligated to support your peer tutors. In practical terms this means that you give them the guidance they need and back them up in front of the administration, other teachers, and other students.

Finally, you are obligated to making working for you fun and rewarding. Remember, you chose your career. Teaching children, especially those with special needs, is not always easy and in fact is often difficult and punishing enough to make even the most dedicated teacher think about quitting. Your peer tutors volunteered to help you. They are not getting paid (although they may be getting school credit). You need to make their time with you worth their while. Build in small, weekly rewards for your peer tutors. Also make sure that there are some larger rewards. I always allowed all of my peer tutors (on a rotating basis) to come with me on field trips. The final trip each semester was a super-duper all day long trip and all peer tutors came on it. Of course the peer tutors were working on these trips, but I tried to make sure that they enjoyed their work.

Student Obligation

During recruitment, training, and throughout the semester you need to emphasize that your peer tutors needed to be loyal to you, the students in their care, and their job. One of the things required is a strong commitment to the privacy of their assigned student. It also means that they had to defend any of your students from school bullies. Trustworthiness and dependability are expected behaviors.

Recruitment

So how do you find these paragons of virtue? More importantly, how do you find students who will be good peer tutors? It isn't that difficult, even beginning at a new school, to find students who would make good peer tutors.

Personal contacts

The first place that teachers should look for potential peer tutors is among the students they already know. Every teacher knows of students who would like nothing better than to work with that teacher all day, every day. These students are predisposed to helping the teacher. Many of these students may work well as peer tutors. Start your list of potential peer tutors with the students you already know.

Referrals from the school office

You may be a first year teacher or have just moved to a school and don't have the luxury of knowing many of the students at that school. I found it very helpful to talk to the secretaries in the school office. Secretaries get to see all the students who pass their desks. They know those students who are troublemakers, those who have been labeled troublemakers, those who are dependable and good workers, and those who are the "brown nosers". Ask the secretaries who they think would make good peer tutors for your students. You can also ask the principal and assistant principal, but I doubt that you will learn anything more than what a good secretary will tell you. Another benefit of seeking the secretaries' counsel is that you can never have too much good will from secretaries, custodians, or cooks.

Referrals from the councilor

The school councilor is another good source of information about possible peer tutors. This person has a general "feel" for the entire student body. He or she probably has already instituted some type of program that uses students in various helping roles. Explain to the councilor what you have in mind and the qualities that you want in the student. I've gotten quite a few referrals from councilors.

Personal recruitment

As a new teacher in a school I've found that the largest single means of getting names on a list of potential peer tutors is to do personal recruitment. I have made posters for the hallways that show Uncle Sam (with my face) pointing to the audience stating, "I want you". I've made a series of announcements over the intercom. These are always lively and upbeat, often playing the Village People's "I want you as a new recruit" song in the background. I've passed out flyers in the hallway and enlisted friendly students to do the same. The common theme in all my recruitment methods is humor and vitality. I portrayed the job as being exciting and important. I did this because I'm firmly convinced that our young people are looking for meaning in their lives and that serving others is one of the most meaningful things that any of us can do.

Selection

So now you have a list of candidates for the job of peer tutor. It's important for several reasons that you sort out the students in the list. First, you probably don't have room for all of the students who want to be in your program. Second, not all of them would be good peer tutors. Finally, the students in your school need to be convinced that working for you is something for which they need to strive – not everyone can be your peer tutor.

There are several steps in sorting the list of students that you have compiled and the first step has nothing to do with the students or their qualifications. Before you select any students for your peer tutor program you have to know the personal qualities you seek in a peer tutor, what you expect of them, and what they can expect of you. Working with anyone is a two way street. Both sides must see that they are gaining something or the relationship will falter and fail. I always expected a lot from my peer workers but I also built in lots of rewards for them.

In the second step you decide on the qualities that your peer tutors need; things like perseverance, higher order thinking, leadership, and willingness to stand firm against the odds (they will need this if you expect them to champion their charges to other students). A lot of teachers look at the list of desired personal qualities and automatically think of those students who are getting high academic scores and are in leadership positions in student organizations. Obviously, these students can be a source of good peer tutors, but don't forget that the qualities you need are also present in those students who are known as troublemakers. It takes real perseverance to keep coming to school when you know that you will probably get in trouble that day. Planning mischief requires higher order thinking skills. Being the person who instigates new means of tormenting the administration requires real leadership. Consistency in holding to a course, even a misguided one, demonstrates the tenacity that you need in your peer tutors. Some of my best peer tutors have been students who were getting Cs and Ds. Often they were the kids on the "outside", not part of any organized school group. In fact one of my best peer tutors started as my worst nightmare.

One of my students, "John", was a real trial, for me as well as for the entire school. His behavior at times was nothing less than bizarre. One of his favorite activities was to abuse a student until the student would physically strike him and then "John" would scream a report to the nearest teacher accusing the other student of abuse. As it happened "Ted" was one of "John's" favorite targets. "Ted" didn't like school, often didn't come to school; was unkempt, greasy, smelly, and in general didn't have any friends outside the "doper" circle. After one incident between "John" and "Ted" the principal wrote up a behavior contract for "Ted" stating that the next incident of fighting would result in "Ted's" arrest by the community police. Out of the blue, the principal asked me, in front of "Ted", if I needed any more peer tutors. Well, I did, but I needed someone who would work with "John". To make a long story short, "Ted" agreed to work as a peer tutor with "John"; "John" agreed to give "Ted" a try; and "Ted" agreed to defend "John" against school bullies and to teach "John" how to get attention in a more appropriate manner. By the end of the first week "John" was loudly proclaiming that "Ted" was the best friend that he had ever had. "John's" behavior improved. "Ted's" behavior improved, and there was no need to call the police.

The next step in your sorting process is to interview each student on the potential peer tutor list. The interview should be short and you only need to ask them a few questions (see Appendix A). The point of the interview is to get to know the students better and gain a bit of an idea of how they might fit into your program. When you are done with the interview give the student a rating. You will use this rating later in the sorting process.

Remember, the point of sorting through the list of potential peer tutors you have compiled is to come up with a list of students who will work well with your students. You should be looking for students as peer tutors who have the qualities needed to work in difficult situations, both with their peers and with teachers. Don't discard a

student just because he or she is not recognized by the administration as a star pupil. Often you will find a diamond buried beneath a layer of coal dust.

Finally, once you have a tentative list of possible peer tutors, develop an evaluatory checklist (see Appendix B). Give the checklist of possible choices to the councilor and asked that the councilor rate each student. Then choose a few students whom you know well and asked them to do the same. After collecting all the forms, average the councilor and students' ratings with your ratings (see Appendix C) and list the students by their composite score. You now had a list of students in descending order based on how well they qualified according to the opinion of several people. By having the councilor, a few trusted students, and yourself rate each potential peer tutor you are able to get a broader insight than if you had done all the rating yourself. Your initial choices for peer tutors come from this ordered list of potential candidates.

Monitoring

In the general classroom

At this point you now have chosen students to be peer tutors and you have trained them in their jobs. For some it will mean working in your classroom with you, for others it will require that they go to a general classroom with one of your students. It is important that you be able to trust your peer tutors in situations that are outside your control. This means that you must monitor their actions as well as the actions of your students in their care. I found that a simple form could do both of these things (see Appendix D). Develop a short form that will allow you to identify the student, peer tutor, teacher, class, and date. This form should also have a simple checklist of what is expected of your student. The peer tutor is in charge of keeping track of those behaviors. By keeping everything simple, you can keep up to date and it won't be too difficult or confusing for your peer tutors. However, I found that I needed one more item on my forms.

One day the health teacher walked into my room. "I want that kid out of my classroom! He doesn't belong there, he's retarded! Taking care of him is your job, that's what you were hired to do, not me! I don't care what you do with him but get him out." With those departing words the health teacher turn around and walked out of my room. I was still sitting on the edge of my chair; I hadn't enough time to even stand up. As I later analyzed the situation, I discovered that I hadn't kept in close enough contact with the teacher. So, I added to my monitoring form. Now the peer tutor was required to get the teacher's initials each day and the teacher was prompted to indicate either yes or no if he or she wanted me to contact them. After making this change it was much easier to stop problems before they started.

Peer Tutor school behavior

Although academic performance of your peer tutors in their other classes should not be a priority for them to work with you in your program, you need to keep informed of their behavior in school. These young people represent you and your program to administrators, other students, and parents. If you take the misguided notion that you don't have to keep track of their school behavior, sooner or later you will find that one of them has put all your work into jeopardy. One way to keep informed is to have a weekly report that each peer tutor turns in to you. It needs to be simple, something that doesn't take any real effort on the part of the peer tutor, something that gives you information from their other teachers, and something that you can review quickly. Appendix E is the form that I used. Each of my peer tutors took the checklist to each of their teachers. Notice that I did not ask any questions about the peer tutor's grades. His or her grade in other classes was not important to me, but how he or she behaved was important. You need to determine what your priorities are in this area. No matter what you track, you need to have this information at your fingertips when someone (usually the administration) comes to you with a charge against one of your peer tutors. It is always better to head off possible problems rather than having to spend time and energy on trying to solve one.

Conclusion

Obviously there is a lot more to designing, implementing and monitoring a peer tutor program than what I have been able to give you. However, these are some of the basics. If you follow these steps, pay attention to your students and peer tutors, and keep good records, you will find that providing the support for your students in the general classroom isn't as difficult as it seemed at first.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

Name:_____

Why do you want to be a peer tutor?

_____

_____

Have you ever worked with someone who has a disability? Yes No

What type of disability was it?

_____

Why should I pick you instead of someone else?

_____

Rating 5 = excellent, 4 = great, 3 = good, 2 = OK, 1 = poor

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Appendix B

Peer tutor possibilities
5 = excellent, 4 = great, 3 = good, 2 = OK, 1 = poor

Student Name ☐

Student Name ☐

Student Name ☐

****

Appendix C

Peer tutor possibilities
5 = excellent, 4 = great, 3 = good, 2 = OK, 1 = poor

	Counselor Recommend	Student Recommend	Interview Score	Average
Name	_____	_____	_____	_____
Name	_____	_____	_____	_____
Name	_____	_____	_____	_____

****

Appendix D

Checklist – Student/Outside

Class Period: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (circle one)

Date: _____ Subject: _____

Student Initials: _____ Peer Tutor: _____

Yes	No	
_____	_____	On time
_____	_____	Prepared
_____	_____	Listens to instructions
_____	_____	Follows directions
_____	_____	Begins activity when instructed
_____	_____	Spends most of time on task
_____	_____	Works at consistent pace
_____	_____	Tries before asking questions
_____	_____	Show respect for teacher
_____	_____	Considers others feelings
_____	_____	Language usage/voice level is appropriate
_____	_____	Good attitude

Total Yeses _____

Teacher initials: _____ Do you want the SpEd teacher to contact you? Yes No

Comments:

****

Appendix E

Peer Tutor Weekly Checklist

Student Name: _____ Date: _____

Dear Teacher,

This student is one of my peer tutors and works with me in the Life Skills classroom. Since modeling appropriate behavior is one of the most important things that teachers or peer tutors do, I require my peer tutors to be current on all of their assignments with all of their teachers. Every week my peer tutors must certify that they are turning in their assignments. I would appreciate it if you would sign this form and indicate the current state for this student. I would also appreciate any thoughts you have concerning this student's classroom behavior.

Mr. G Gilberts

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Period (circle one)

Teacher Signature: _____

Y	N		Comments
___	___	Assignments up to date.	_____
___	___	On time to class	_____
___	___	Prepared for class	_____
		Respect/cooperate with teacher	
___	___	Listens to instructions	_____
___	___	Begins activity when instructed	_____
___	___	Spends most of time on task	_____
___	___	Shows respect for teacher	_____
		Respect/cooperate with other students	
___	___	Considers others feelings	_____
___	___	Works well with others	_____
___	___	Appropriate language	_____

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